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Styles of Philosophies after the “war”

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Abstract

By “war” I understand the most general form of opposition in which the stylistic problems of philosophy have already surfaced, i.e. the distinction between philosophy and literature. I wish to show where and how the real philosophical questions in connection to the possible genres and styles of philosophical writings arise. To do so I distinguish five different possibilities of how literature and philosophy can be related to each other in a philosophical discourse, and I argue that when we turn to art with the aim of doing philosophy it has to carry implications in excess of the claim that literary texts or art works have at times a degree of philosophical merit. I also examine when a certain style can become dogmatic, and what it means to accept that pluralism should prevail in the styles of philosophy.

Adrienne Gálosi: *Styles of Philosophies after the “war”*¹

Raising the question of possible registers and styles of philosophical writing is still a relevant issue, both in the historical analysis of different genres, and in considering the possible current approaches to philosophical problems. Although the philosophy vs. literature opposition has already been one of the most debated issues of the philosophy of the second part of the 20th century, when the issue of the style of writing philosophy was philosophically raised and discussed.² The stylistic problems of philosophy have already surfaced in the form of different oppositions like the distinction between rigorous and more poetizing philosophy, in a more “geopolitical” vein between the academic camps of analytic and continental philosophy, or to turn this opposition philosophically to the most general form, as the distinction between philosophy and literature. We may say that the “literature war”³ is over, but still those who represent in their writings the “less rigorous” way of philosophising often feel that they have to justify their approach.

At first sight the defensive attitude seems justified but not from a philosophical, but rather from a social point of view. It seems undeniable, that contemporary professional discourse is quite standardised, and as such more and more homogeneous, its accepted possible formal and linguistic field is rather restricted, closed. We are miles away from Shaftesbury’s decision – I deliberately mention an Englishman as an example – that the form and content of a philosophical writing must have an affinity with each other. To conform to his own requirement, in his work *Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* which thematizes the philosophical significance of free discourse, he rightly chooses the freedom of explication with philosophical intention. The genre of the work is a fictional essay letter, which is the stylistic mirror of the subject matter, it states in its form what it states in its philosophical content. And it also seems apparent that the diversity of forms and genres that philosophers availed themselves of (let us attempt a partial list: essay, dialogue,

1 This paper was presented at the conference “Registers of Philosophy III.,” May 13, 2017, Budapest, organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Pázmány Péter Catholic University.

2 In the Hungarian discourse the debate was if not sparked off but opened as the opposition of analytic and continental philosophy ten years ago, when the “continental side” - namely Tamás Ullmann and Tibor Schwendtner – after the attack of the analytic school demonstrated the unreflected presuppositions of the “rigorousness” of the analytic claim. See: Boldizsár Eszes –János Tózsér: “Mi az analitikus filozófia?” in: *Kellék* 27-28, 2003, 45-72.; Tibor Schwendtner: “Az analitikus versus kontinentális filozófia” in: *Magyar Filozófiai Szemle* 2006/1-2, 1-16.; Tamás Ullmann: “Analitikus és kontinentális filozófia” in: *Magyar Filozófiai Szemle* 2006/3-4, 227-252.

3 I use „literature war” after the so-called „canon war” of the 90s, though the debate on canon was more like a „war”, while the influence of continental (mainly French) post-structuralist philosophy and the debate it triggered remained within the walls of the discipline.

letter, critique, investigation, confession, meditation, diary, commentary, inquiry, aphorism, fragment, lecture, encyclopedia, and probably many more) seems to erode now with philosophy's adaptation to sciences.

The genre, the style of a philosophical writing, besides being the trace of individual traits of the author, has always been dependent on at least two things: on the function philosophy carried out in the given era, and on what questions were considered legitimate. There are numerous different historical genres of philosophy, which is an unavoidable aspect to grapple with if we are to understand the respective philosophies. We cannot just consider the bare propositions, as I am convinced, since we cannot ignore history from the history of philosophy. It means that our interpretative approach should also involve the reconstruction (even if partial) of the space of the given genre, its uses and the factors influencing its uses in its own time – among many other things.

But instead of turning to interesting questions of the history of genres and style, let me stick to the present. I do not aim at anything more fundamental than to offer an approximate description of how one can approach the philosophy vs. literature controversy, and where philosophical questions arise. And perhaps, though indirectly, we may learn something from ourselves if we look at the styles of our philosophies from a certain distance.

Now we are in the pedestrian period of normal science, when all those who wish to enter the profession and use its benefits must accept the prevailing model of philosophical expression. The globalisation of all sciences makes this process of standardisation even faster. English has become the lingua franca, strengthening the Anglophone academy, and I suspect, save two, three big languages, it is not until many generations that minor languages will give up their own scientific languages. On the other hand, you could say, globalisation has brought along another process pointing to the opposite direction, namely the inclusion of non-Western philosophies, the so-called “ethnophilosophies”, which may result in the widening of concepts and possible forms, styles of philosophy. As I can see, these traditions are still dismissed as not philosophy, or when there is an integrative discourse on non-Western philosophy, it is entirely delivered in the mainstream language of the West. There is no real multiculturalism in this field.

All this means that I totally agree with Jon Stewart in his description and evaluation of the present scene concerning genre and style, that compared to the richness of the tradition,

our era is impoverished.⁴ This question is certainly seriously connected to philosophy, mainly because, as I have said, historical interpretations often cannot do without reflecting on the implications that a certain genre carries. But, if I may distinguish for the present purpose what is basically inseparable, it is not a purely philosophical question, but an indispensable social and historical one. It is *about* philosophy but not philosophical itself. It turns to be a real philosophical question when we ask whether the reason for the standardisation lies only in the contemporary philosophical mass production, and in the ideal of objective comparability of this production, or should we rather see it as the result of an evolution. Do we have to regard mainstream discourse as a long journey of clarification when, finally, all philosophical problems are displayed in their proper philosophical shape? Is it an evolution where the fittest survived granting that with the rigorous, argumentative treatise type of “paper” we have the best form for all philosophical questions to date? Should we accept that the possible philosophical problems, the methodology of their discussion, and the style intimately connected to that have reached their best, most effective mode of discourse? If it is so, it is not a social, institutional constraint to conform to this standardized single model, but rather a philosophical insight in itself.

How does Anglo-American philosophy see this single form of discourse that is said to be assured of success?⁵ Without going into details how the austere imperative of philosophy as science determines its methodological and linguistic characters, let me mention just a few: a clear-cut definition and contextualisation of the problem, theoretical comprehensiveness, defining terminology, constructing formalized arguments, logical and verbal explicitness, clarity, precision and concision. We surely consider these (or most of them) very appealing virtues of a distinguished prose, so sometimes distinguishing texts of “rigorous” and “literary philosophy” is not an easy classification.

Now let us approach this from a different perspective, and first let us sort out some ways of how literature and philosophy can be related to each other in a philosophical discourse. 1. First, when the special way of learning from literature is examined philosophically – this way

4 See his book: Jon Stewart: *The Unity of Content and Form in Philosophical Writing: The Perils of Conformity*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, , and also his paper presented in this series of conferences in 2016, “Dostoevsky and the Novel as Philosophy”, *Working Papers in Philosophy – The Registers of Philosophy*, 2016/4, http://www.phil-inst.hu/images/Esem%C3%A9nyek/2016/Registers_of_Philosophy_2016/2016_04_ed_stewart_dostoevsky_and_the_novel.pdf

5 Stepping forward from the institutional aspects, by success here I mean being capable of solving philosophical problems.

is sometimes contrasted to learning from science. These investigations mostly aim at connecting qualitative features of literature with its cognitive contribution. There are two connected claims of such writings; the first one is that there are certain aspects in the nature of human life that literary narratives can more fittingly state, and the second one is that for grasping such aspects of human life intellectual activity alone is not enough, emotions have an important cognitive role as well.⁶

2. The second possible way of reading literature from a philosophical interest is represented for example by Jon Stewart. He provides excellent interpretations demonstrating that philosophical questions can be illustrated for instance by the portrayal of a literary character, and in certain cases, as in his example of Dostoevsky, the illustration of a proposition is more expressive than in the form of a pure philosophical statement. My question is whether one considers this literary criticism or philosophy? I do not think it is the latter one. I find these two ways of talking about literature quite close to each other, though the first one is closer to cognitive psychology while the latter one is closer to criticism. Both regard literature as a kind of tool, both are benign with art, they acknowledge that a certain type of knowledge can be gained from it, they show that this can even be a non-explicated philosophical insight. But it is rather the first approach that acknowledges that literature can indeed have an important instrumental role, but far more is claimed for it, so it clearly states that examining the cognitive contribution of literature is just one of the many possible ways of dealing with literary narratives.

The second kind of interpretation that reads literature as an illustration of philosophy, no matter how powerful this may be, proposes philosophically nothing more than we could know without that piece of art. This means that searching for possible philosophical contents in any form and piece of art is not automatically philosophy. With this I definitely do not want to say that literature or any forms of art could not be the “plane” of first-rate philosophy: remember Deleuze understanding the movies, Foucault the nature of representation via Magritte, Heidegger showing the *aletheia* through the Greek temple, Barthes reading Balzac, Derrida reading Artaud – just to mention one example from each different form of art.

3. The third, truly philosophical possibility is that if one finds, or rather invents philosophical concepts that correspond to the given artistic practice. This (mostly Deleuzean) approach aims at understanding philosophically certain aspects of art which reveal workings

⁶ See for example Martha C. Nussbaum’s excellent book: *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

of affections, perceptions, imagination that would not be accessible without art. While in the second case art serves as an illustration, in the third case it is a non-disposable ladder, because there is no other way of knowing or experiencing of what it offers – except through art. Thus, art is not the content, but rather the subject of this philosophy.⁷ To put it in another way, when we turn to art with the aim of doing philosophy, it has to carry implications in excess of the claim that literary texts or art works have at times a degree of philosophical merit.

4. There is a fourth possibility for reading literature from a philosophical perspective: this is the typical de-constructive reading pursued mostly by literary critics, who pretentiously endeavour to reveal philosophical truths in texts about the nature of language. The usual way of this kind of reading aims to prove that contrasting terms or rhetoric figures get their meanings by reciprocal definability and in this sense, they “presuppose” each other, consequently it becomes clear that most of what the text offers as its privileged meaning is just a matter of oppositional contrast-effects with the repressed meaning. I regard this way of reading literature as philosophy because in its best examples, while giving a sophisticated interpretation of the given piece, it also reveals something of the working of the language, and the work of art does not illustrate but manifests this.

So far I have listed four different practices: 1. Examining literature as a form of cognition; 2. Doing some sort of literary criticism that detects the philosophical problems in art works; 3. Thinking with arts and literature since they are best capable of revealing the conditions of attributing meaning or conditions of sensibility; 4. Interpreting literature for the sake of gaining a certain philosophy of language. Of course, we cannot hold that these are very clear-cut categories with strict boundaries. They can be very close to each other, they can be overlapping, can be conducted simultaneously in an investigation. I list them as separate possibilities only to show clearly, that no matter how unconventionally they may “de-construct”, at the same time they unwillingly “reconstruct” the clear distinction between literature and philosophy. And it is crucial to keep it in mind that if one wants to support the literariness of philosophy by approximating these two modes of thought, it has another philosophical path.

And this we can count as the fifth possibility: when literature returns to philosophy as the unconscious repressed, as the condition of the philosophically intelligible. Of course, I am talking about Derrida’s project. On the one hand, deconstruction as a method, as we have

⁷ Of course, all those philosophers – like Schelling and Heidegger – who turn to arts to ask what the truth is, fall under this category. Though thinking *with* arts philosophically is a much wider terrain than an aesthetizing ontology.

seen, “reconstructs” the distinction, because as Richard Rorty says, agreeing with Jonathan Culler, “it requires two different straight persons”,⁸ on the other hand, for deconstruction as a philosophical project it is essential to break down this distinction. Among the many attempts to end the quarrel between literature and philosophy that already Plato described as an “old” one, perhaps this most recent one is the most radical. We know that Derrida’s manoeuvre attacks from the opposite direction, he reads philosophy as literature. He wants us to believe that the most truly philosophical reading of a philosophical work is one that questions the foundation of its discourse and treats it as a fictive rhetoric construct. The philosophy–literature distinction is based on oppositions like representational–non-representational, or literal/proper–metaphorical, granting any access to reality and truth only to the previous one, while the latter is stuck in the field of appearance.⁹ Derrida claims that neither literature nor philosophy have any access to truths, for they are kinds of writing inescapably enmeshed in the essentially rhetorical character of all dialectic. He argues that the distinction between the metaphorical and the literal, or proper, which is conceived of as being able to refer to the truth, namely the ultimate nature of reality, is essential to philosophy, but the very terms used to draw the contrast are themselves rhetorical, indeed figurative. I do not need to continue here with all the traces, supplements, margins and other Derridean concepts that he locates beyond the space of the philosophical text, but nonetheless - though without any centre of reference - these form the conditions of intelligibility.¹⁰ We could accept this, but then it would consequently mean that in whatever way philosophy is to be literature then literature is to be philosophy, which it is not.¹¹ I would definitely hesitate to make a place for literary texts inside philosophy in general, though we can admit that there are literary genres or certain writings that are closer to philosophy. In this respect, I can agree with Jon Stewart when he says “Philosophy is not literature, but literature can contain philosophy.”¹² Derrida’s fans would say that if I say so, then I did not understand a thing, as this is an invalid opposition since literature has subsumed and devoured philosophy leaving only an undifferentiated textuality. But I do not think it is the case. My interpretation may be too reserved to be radical enough, but I could never think of Derrida as attempting to deny and abolish all distinctions,

8 Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers*, Volume 2., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 85.

9 For a good summary of de-constructionist tactics of reading see for example: Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, New York: Ithaca, 1982, 149-50.

10 See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982.

11 If it were, Stewart’s project for instance would not make any sense to prove that literature is capable of containing philosophical meanings.

12 Stewart, *Unity*, 168.

he rather re-characterizes them. From this point of view, it would be quite instructive to consider his debate with Austin for instance. There, as I see it, he refuses that there is no effect of ordinary language, no effect of presence and furthermore, he says, it is simply “that those effects do not exclude what is generally opposed to them, term by term; on the contrary, they suppose it in an asymmetrical way, as the general space for their possibility.”¹³ We are warned here that even philosophical writing is not only a reflection of truth, but also the “making” of truth since it also creates the context in which its meanings are generated.

Here we can return to the style of analytic philosophy, and now I can add that the distinguished prose becomes dogmatic if it is not considered as *only one* of the possible ways of conveying clear thoughts in a coherent and distinct way, but in accordance with a referential comprehension of language, its concepts are regarded as pre-discursive given, and the intellectual content presented by them is believed to be measurable by universal and ahistorical standards. Of course, there are thinkers like Carnap, Strawson, Quine, Davidson, for whom truth must be “reinvented” again and again in their contexts, but I think they are much more amenable to the continental approach.

I have gone to great lengths to explain in what sense I think the “literature war” is over. I say it even though I am not one of those who want to obliterate the differences in kind in the case of philosophy, art and science. And I definitely do not want to suggest that one side has won the battle once and for all. But if the question has already been addressed philosophically at the most fundamental level, then we must be careful to make sure that the answer is philosophical as well.

What inevitably follows from this is that style does matter. When the philosopher chooses from the possibilities at her disposal, at the same time relinquishing others, he also chooses a certain way of interpreting his activity and now, after the “literature war”, it implies a certain way of interpreting the nature of truth. Danto says with lots of irony and a bit of fear in his tone that “when we turn to other forms we may also be turning to other conceptions of philosophical truth.”¹⁴ Bad news for him, yes, but not in the sense that form and style would be totally idiosyncratic resulting in idiosyncratic “truths”. But our pre-epistemological assumptions, that is, the way we think about the truth will determine how we set off on the

13 Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context” in: *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988, 19.

14 Arthur C. Danto: “Philosophy as/and/of Literature” in: *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 140.

road of thinking. The slippery term of style for me is not an outward technical concept, but rather an operative one in this sense.

If we consider different forms and genres historically it is precisely here where we can easily realize that while accepting the irreducible figurativity and rhetoricity of writing and language, we do not necessarily have to arrive at total relativism. Instead of reciting the differences of the externalist and internalist approaches, I would rather emphasize here the concept of field (Bourdieu) or plane (Deleuze), which is the setting in which the possible legitimate questions, topics, forms, genres are positioned. And the position of an agent cannot be understood especially in philosophy without considering its interaction with the others, because most of the philosophical writings are not monologues in their nature, but are the results of conflicts with other texts. And this is not just sheer intertextuality! To understand genre or form, one must understand the either explicit or implicit debate that the writing is part of. If one tries to understand and evaluate a past philosophy without grappling with the field/plane his/her critique will just talk past it. In the case of philosophy, it is the most essential that the theoretician and the historian should always reflect on each other.

I promise I will not solve the problem of style philosophically, thus cancelling the occasion for next year's conference. Let me just propose some problems. We may easily think that style is somehow connected to the subject matter. Should our writing somehow reflect the nature of the topic, for it is what leads, directs our thoughts? Supposing this, we could presume that the closer the philosophical style is to artistic prose, the more significant the truth of art (whatever it might be) is for the author. Returning to Shaftesbury for a second we can say that his case, being a kind of self-referential one, is easy: his topic is promoting the best way of philosophizing, he argues for the free, unrestricted, witty conversation, which best serves our mutual education. Would anyone have believed him if he had argued for this in the form of an academic treatise? But what would be the right form of those writings that ponder the a priori of knowledge, the freedom of the individual or the role of the prime mover? I think we must be careful assuming direct affiliation between thematic content and style. As we have seen philosophical problems can be discussed in many genres, and the question itself does not entail a certain form. But if we regard philosophy as genre not only inventing thoughts but also showing the power of thinking, then we expect a philosophical work to unveil its train of thought, process of thinking. This is exactly what style can do: what it definitely reveals is one's methodology. Style may have some affinity with the topic, but it certainly reveals how one tries to get rid of the routine and invent new ideas. If we are to see some advancement in philosophy, and not just to join in the indefinite collective repetition of

the same ideas, then we need to refine our language as much as possible to the new insights, and this is style in itself. So philosophically style vanishes, becomes nothing when it is reduced to sheer ornamentation.

I cannot tell you what style is, but certainly, I hope I have shown that it is neither something superfluous nor exterior to meaning. In a text, style conveys what escapes precise determination but nonetheless makes comprehension possible. We can understand style if we cut it off from the individual's psyche and see it as a form of solution, an answer to the problems of the era. Style is individuation on the one hand, but on the other hand, it is the manifestation of this individuation to others, so it is an interplay between singularity and generality. At this point we can come to understand that the real philosophical questioning of style could only be carried out in the form of a phenomenology of language.

So far I have said nothing about how styles of contemporary philosophies may characterize us. Let me explain briefly: raising this issue again, like Stewart does in his aforementioned work, tells me that perhaps now we want to get over the polarizing debate, when an either-or choice excludes the many different shades of positions between the extremes, namely that philosophy is either a rigorous science or talking nonsense like poets do. Perhaps there are renewed efforts for reconciliation between the incommensurable paradigms. Perhaps ours is the time for demonstrating that pluralism prevails in the world of humanities, meaning that there are, or should be, more philosophies, more worlds of philosophies. On the one hand the practice of the world of humanities is a real mass production, but on the other hand more and more secure guards are standing at the doors of its academies. I know it is no small thing to diminish the philosophical differences, as they entail different interpretative practices and the rationality they all envisage is central to what they think of the entire range of human possibilities. But still, all philosophy and all literature are acts of domestication of anything standing in an opposition to us: nature, our own creatures, history and ourselves. This process of domestication, conferring meaning, or approaching truth (either with the hope to catch it, or without the belief to fix it), – to make life and our profession meaningful – is an end in itself; and it requires the freedom of thought. But this freedom also has to be reinvented again and again, because thought is usually constrained, forced – besides many other things – by style itself.

